



The Chachalaca

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RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

THIS CHAPTER IS AN AFFILIATE OF THE TEXAS MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM JOINTLY SPONSORED BY TEXAS AGRILIFE EXTENSION AND THE TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT.

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ELABORATE NEST CONSTRUCTION USES A VARIETY OF MATERIALS

Story and photos by Anita Westervelt

Ash trees seem to shed most of their leaves with the first fall wind event, revealing what might previously have been hidden -- like the magnificent architecture of an Altamira oriole's nest.



Typical Altamira Oriole Nest

The female Altamira oriole builds an interesting and elaborate nest, sometimes taking as many as three weeks or more to construct it. Nests have been found that measure from 14 to 26 inches in length and about six inches in diameter. The Altamira oriole is the largest of the North American orioles, and it builds the longest nest of any bird in North America.

The top of the nest hangs open with a portion woven around a branch, generally near the tip, at a mid to high level of a tree. Many Altamira oriole nests are conspicuous, and are sometimes built on overhead utility wires.

Materials, according to Sharon Beals in her book, "Nests: Fifty Nests and the Birds that Built Them," are thickly woven out of fibrous materials, such as long vines and palm fibers, the inner bark of trees, grasses and other plants, aerial roots of epiphytes, long leaves, flax, horsehair and even string, plastic twine and other refuse from human occupation.

The nesting chamber is at the bottom of the structure, it is usually lined with loose straw, wool, feathers or other soft material. Two typical Valley trees used by Altamira orioles for nest building are Mexican ash and sugar hackberry.

The Rio Grande Valley is the top of the range of this tropical oriole which is common in northeastern Mexico, the Mexican Gulf Coast and northern Central America. It is a year-round resident in the Valley, most notably in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.



Hooded Oriole Nest

Altamira orioles are often seen as a flash of brilliant orange, hopping among branches and quickly flying between trees. They forage with other orioles, such as hooded orioles, a summer resident of the Valley. Hooded orioles weave a nest the size and shape of a teacup, onto the fronds of a palm.



Altamira Orioles

In Texas, Altamira orioles breed from April to late July. The young stay in the nest about two weeks and are fed by both parents. The male will take over feeding the first brood while the female begins constructing a second nest, if there will be a second brood that season. Nests typically are not re-used.

The Altamira oriole's diet is mostly insects, especially grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars, and ants and spiders. They also feed on berries and small fruits, including hackberry fruit and figs. They will drink flower nectar and have been known to visit feeders for sugar-water.

The Internet offers a number of sites for researching birds, including allaboutbirds.org, adubon.org, whatbird.com, ebird.org, birds.cornell.edu and tstbba.tamu.edu.



Altamira Oriole in Flight

If you're a fan of collective bird nouns, *whatbird.com* offers two that are used for groups of orioles: a pitch of orioles or a split of orioles. Enter "collective bird nouns" in your search engine for links to fun facts and information about nouns to use for groups of other birds.

Pollinator Gardens

Christina Mild

Recently we've been asked to recommend species for "Pollinator Gardens." Local beekeepers have also been curious about which species to plant for their honeybees.

I'm sure that some types of bees will prefer certain flowers. In fact, Mexican *Caesalpinia* (*Caesalpinia mexicana*) most often attracts very large black bees.

In general, as I'm photographing blooming things, bees are the most prevalent insect which I capture in a photo.

Guajillo, which blooms very early in the year in the western valley and in the Arroyo Colorado brush, has been noted for many years by beekeepers to produce honey with superior flavor.

Huisache is more widespread, blooming just after Guajillo, and is a good honey plant also.

Black Brush, probably the most common shrub in Starr County, has blooms which are an excellent source of honey. Black Brush is referred to as "Poor Man's Ebony." It is typically shorter and more shrub-like. Black Brush and Ebony will also bloom whenever moisture is available, and attracts many bees.

Huisachillo, easily confused with Huisache, will bloom more than once during the year, whenever moisture is available. It probably produces honey similar to that from Huisache.

It is likely that the entire group of Legumes with mimosa-like blooms (shaped like puffballs or caterpillar-like cylindrical clusters) is excellent for pollen-seeking bees. See *Plants of Deep South Texas* pages 239-253. Most of these are woody plants which are perennial.



I have often wondered what benefit Mexican Capraria (*Capraria mexicana*) provides for animals. Today I re-discovered the above photo of a pollen-gathering bee on the flower. *Capraria* easily forms colonies in watered gardens. It seems resistant to disease, is thornless, grows in poor soil and persists through challenging conditions.

Such shrubs as Beebrush (*Aloysia gratissima*) and the wildflower, Beebalm, have earned their common names by attracting bees. (Beebrush photo below.).



Some wildflowers will only release their pollen when bees buzz within their flowers.

Bees may also be capable of removing the special pollinia (pollen-containing sacs) from within milkweed blooms.

Wildflowers, agave, succulents, cacti, shrubs, trees and vines may produce blooms bearing pollen collected by bees.

Thus, it seems that a “Pollinator Garden” can be a garden of most any blooming native species which will do well in the soil, sunlight and moisture of a particular site.

A groundcover of Frogfruit will provide pollen from the lowest level of a garden. Frogfruit is perennial, withstands full sun, and will return after drought.

Another good start for new gardens is a blanket of wildflowers. Locally-collected seed will give you seed stock best suited to this locale. If locally-collected seed is not available, www.seedsource.com, located in Texas, is a great source of native wildflower seed. This website provides a map to show which regions are best for any species they sell. They also provide pictures of seedlings, which helps a lot if you have to do any weeding of the garden site.

Those who wish to establish a pollinator garden in the sandy soils of our coast would be well-advised to consult “Wildflowers and Other Plants of Texas Beaches and Islands” by Alfred Richardson.

In any area which has not been badly damaged by human activity, the plants which perform best in that location are already there. They may be there only as seed within the soil, but those species may return if growing conditions improve. What is usually required to encourage return of this natural diversity is the removal of invasive grasses and other species, followed by regular watering. A bit of extra moisture will produce blooms in many species, as well as reappearance of species which were there long ago.

In any area where trees are available for vines to grow upon, encouragement or reintroduction of native vines may provide the greatest biomass of blooms, as vines can cover large areas. Control, of course, is necessary, as the vines choose where to grow; they may become an unwanted blanket over your favorite or rare shrub or tree.

A recent talk by Mike Heep on soils (for Native Plant Project) pointed out the importance of what is in the soil to plant performance. The nitty-gritty is that the addition of organic matter often provides the most help in terms of soil pH, nutrient, moisture and oxygen availability for plants. Preparing a garden site might be as simple and cheap as adding bagged leaves which show up at the curb for city pick-up. Leaves can be layered on a site to decompose over time (thrashers especially enjoy searching through leaves for available insects and worms) or they can be tilled into the soil prior to planting. Organic fertilizers are helpful, but Heep pointed out that any fertilizer must be watered into the soil before the plant can absorb needed nutrients.

Designing any garden for a school or city property presents a special challenge. Most of these places will lack caretakers who recognize anything beyond common landscaping plants. Control of invasive grass species, especially Bermuda grass and Old World Bluestem (King Ranch, Kleberg), will be all but impossible. Thus, it is unlikely that wildflowers, groundcovers or vines would persist long-term. Easily-grown thorn-less shrubs such as Fiddlewood or Barbados Cherry might be good choices for “public” spaces. Groundskeepers are more likely to have success with just a few species which they can easily recognize and manage. Native crotons have reliable blooms for much of the year. Dove Croton or Cortez Croton grow well in cultivation and may also be acceptable to a groundskeeper.

It's probably hard to find a native bloom which does not provide desirable pollen. Diversity will help to provide available blooms throughout the seasons.

VARIETY IS THE SECRET TO ACHIEVING 4,000 TEXAS MASTER NATURALIST VOLUNTEER HOURS

Anita Westervelt



*Texas Master Naturalist Anita
comfort zone of thorn-scrub*

to build something. With back-up and encouragement from TMN Greg Storms, they completed an arduous plumbing chore in eight hours for a pond in the Betty McEnery Memorial Garden along Ebony Loop in Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. (Photo by Frank Wiseman.)

*Westervelt stepped out of her
demolition and debris clearing*

Here's a quick formula for Texas Master Naturalist success (in no particular order): Discover it all. Get some weeding buddies. Find your niche. Become friends with an expert.

Curiosity has always been my guide. By trade, education and experience, I'm a communication director, writer, photographer, news reporter, photojournalist, event coordinator, public relations expert, layout and design aficionado and PowerPoint devotee.

During my first year as a Texas Master Naturalist (2013), I checked out as many volunteer projects and opportunities as possible. It was the discovery phase.

By the second or third week of TMN classes in 2013, three of us women decided to be weeding buddies and jumped in hands first to help at the butterfly garden at Sabal Palm Sanctuary in Brownsville. We're still friends although we've embraced different volunteer arenas.

As a Texas Master Naturalist, my first love is butterflies. In order to attract butterflies, one must have plants. I hadn't really put that together until I stumbled into a native plant PowerPoint presentation, three weeks into beginning TMN training. The presentation was given by Texas Master Naturalist Frank Wiseman, who also was instrumental in creating our TMN chapter. Frank gave a perfect presentation -- attractive photography, interesting PowerPoint design and execution, excellent delivery, and he didn't read the information off the slides because he knew

his subject. A real professional deal. I was impressed. His presentation was so professional that I didn't think he'd take the time to talk to me -- a newbie.

But he did. That was the beginning of a great mentorship and friendship. The most important factor was that Frank was willing to share his vast knowledge. Frank and I went on to re-establish a volunteer team in Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park in 2015, and lead the group as co-chairmen. The group, the Thursday Morning Ebony Loop Volunteer Team, maintains the specialty gardens that Frank and the other original team members designed and built when the chapter was first forming, in 2002. Currently, along with honorary TMN Christina Mild, we teach garden and trail maintenance, native plant identification, a bit of habitat theory and welcome local residents, Winter Texans and master naturalists to the team each week.

Here are some of my recommendations for keeping an active interest in the organization, especially for those relatively new to the chapter.

Attend as many **lectures, presentations and workshops** as you can in order to learn about everything. Try to car-pool as much as possible in order to meet new people, and get different perspectives on life during the travel time.

Check out many of the **volunteer opportunities** offered via the List Serve or social media to see what you like doing. Check out our sister chapter, South Texas Border Chapter. They also offer advance training opportunities, events and monthly speakers which are posted on their Facebook page and reached via their website at <https://www.stbctmn.org/>

Booth sit. Booth sitting is paramount to one of the tenets of being a Texas Master Naturalist. Initially, it's an easy opportunity to learn how to give information to the public. It also lets you attend a variety of fairs where you can further broaden your TMN horizons, meet TMN members and others, and it offers a fun way to acquire volunteer hours.

Find a niche. Then take it up a notch -- become an expert. Learn how to give a professional PowerPoint presentation and get on the chapter's speaking circuit. Check out the list on our website, <https://www.rgvctmn.org>

Because the right brain activity of designing PowerPoint presentations is such a fun and creative stress release, I had built quite a library of presentations. Instead of just teaching "Presentation Skills Training," I began presenting my other PowerPoint presentations to garden clubs, fraternal lunch-bunch groups, Winter Texan RV events and clubs, annual local fairs in break-out sessions and meeting presentations at our sister TMN chapter in the Upper Valley, and to the two Valley Master Gardener meetings and training sessions.

Because of my writing background, the McAllen Monitor asked me to write a monthly nature column; our former chapter Webmaster and designer, Jimmy Paz, encouraged me to write a blog for the chapter website (**Anita's Blog**); Cameron County Master Gardeners asked me to contribute a plant article each month on their page in the Sunday Valley Morning Star. Jimmy designed a link on our website, "Galleries" (articles archived) so we could continue educating the public with native and nature information long after the newspapers are thrown out.

PLANT TERMINOLOGY

Story and photos by Anita Westervelt

In the plant world, exact terminology is important when one wants to know what is being talked about. The following words are those likely to be encountered during native plant lectures or found while perusing plant books.

Native -- naturally occurring in an area without human introduction. “A plant that is part of the balance of nature that has developed over hundreds or thousands of years in a particular region or ecosystem,” according to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, TakeCareOfTexas.org campaign.

The Valley sports more than 1,050 native species. Some say native plants are only those that were recorded prior to the arrival of European immigrants. The Texas ebony (*Chloroleucon ebano*) fits that category.

Endemic -- a plant unique to a defined geographic location (often used -- not always correctly -- interchangeably with the word native).

Indigenous -- originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native.

Opportunistic -- in regard to a native plant, one that is able to take advantage of disturbance to the soil or existing vegetation to spread quickly and out-compete the other plants on the disturbed site.



Indian Mallow (*Abutilon trisulcatum*)

In Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park, three furrowed Indian mallow (*Abutilon trisulcatum*) is more opportunistic than Texas Master Naturalist volunteers maintaining Ebony Loop specialty gardens would like. Although trisulcatum seeds provide excellent bird food, birds help spread the plant throughout the park where it inundates trail edges and other gardens with the tall, prolific plants. Quick identifying features of this mallow are its three-cornered stem and large, heart-shaped, soft velvety leaves.

Non-Native -- a plant introduced with human help (intentionally or accidentally) to a new place or new type of habitat where it was not previously found. Introduced, non-native and exotic can be used interchangeably.

Introduced -- an introduced species is a plant that is not native to the place or area where it is considered introduced. Instead, the species has been accidentally or deliberately transported to the new location by human activity. The nursery trade introduced Cape honeysuckle (*Tecomaria capensis*), native to southern Africa, which became a popular nectar plant for hummingbirds, butterflies and bees.

Exotic -- not native; introduced from another region or country. Hibiscus, prevalent in warm, tropical regions all over the world, is an exotic species cultivated from eight original hibiscus species native to Madagascar, Mauritius, Fiji, Hawaii, China and India, and introduced in the 12th century.

Naturalized -- describes a plant, introduced from another region that grows and reproduces readily in competition with the natural flora. Texas lantana (*Lantana urticoides*) is native to the Valley; West Indian lantana (*Lantana camara*) is naturalized. Or as some say, "It's native now; it's been here more than one hundred years."

Adaptive -- plants that are not native and not invasive, but are able to thrive in the local climate and soil conditions. Most often they originate from areas with similar soil types, climates and hardiness zones. The Tamaulipan olive tree (*Cordia alba*), native to Central America, is considered adaptive in Harlingen. The tree sports clusters of yellow blooms in spring and summer.

Aggressive -- a native plant that spreads faster than preferred and into unwanted areas.

A plant may be aggressive in one area of its region and well-behaved or hard to establish in another. Texas Master Naturalist volunteers in Hugh Ramsey Nature Park find the native plant, *Dicliptera sexangularis*, to be quite aggressive in the park.

Invasive -- a non-native species that is able to establish itself within existing native plant communities and poses a threat to the integrity of the ecological community. To most of those who volunteer in Valley nature parks, Guinea grass (*Megathyrsus maximus*) is synonymous with the word invasive. Guinea grass is native to tropical Africa. It also is opportunistic (takes advantage of disturbed soil). To help combat that in the specialty gardens around Ebony Loop,

Texas Master Naturalist volunteers repopulate a cleared area with native species. For information about invasive species of concern in Texas visit www.texasinvasives.org



Broad leaves of Guinea grass



Guinea grass. Look for the reddish center

United States Department of Agriculture plant-related definitions and botanical websites were helpful in writing this article and the book, Harris, James and Harris Melinda, “Plant Identification Terminology -- An Illustrated Glossary,” Second Edition; Spring Lake Publishing, Spring Lake Utah.

NEWEST EBONY LOOP GARDEN IS COMPLETED AS THE YEAR ROLLS TO AN END

Anita Westervelt

Many organizations require a list of “significant events” as they round out a year.

Thanks to Texas Master Naturalist Frank Wiseman, our chapter’s Hugh Ramsey Nature Park project, Ebony Loop, gets a running commentary on two Facebook pages, highlighting the Thursday Morning Volunteer Team’s weekly accomplishments.

This year, we’ve concentrated a lot of labor on the gardens just around the first curve after entering Ebony Loop from the parking lot via the rolling gate.

The area just past the curve, known as Hachinal Corner, has received a lot of attention from the team of volunteers. Three furrowed Indian mallow (*Abutilon trisulcatum*) continues to pop up and take over. Twice this year, we rescued the three young Texas torchwood trees (*Amyris texana*) and brush holly (*Xylosma flexuosa*) shrubs from being overpowered by the aggressive mallow.

A spring project ran into summer and then fall as we continued to consider new concepts for the benefit of park-goers. The Citrus Garden, which was formally opened in August with Frank dedicating a bench in honor of his friend and fellow Texas Master Naturalist, Dick Roesler. (See August quarterly Chachalaca newsletter). While we wait for the five Rutaceae family species of trees to gain some height, we wanted to give the new garden a purpose. As the Rutaceae trees are all host to the giant swallowtail butterfly, it was just another step to thinking about making the

area butterfly friendly -- in honor of the bench and to give a kaleidoscope of colorful winged insects to those who choose to rest awhile.

We planted a lot of early spring bloomers, like coastal germander (*Teucrium cubense*) to border the trail edge of the garden and bernadette, also called Rio Grande pearlhead (*Isocarpha oppositifolia*). A second planting included pink-blooming pavonias (*Pavonia lasiopetala*) and yellow-blooming hairy wedelias (*Wedelia acupulcensis* Var. *hispidata*). And then finally, heliotropes (*Heliotropium angiospermum*), a dalea (*Dalea scandens*) and two Tepozán butterfly bushes (*Buddleja sessiliflora*) were planted among the five Rutaceae trees.

That was a lot of clearing, digging, uprooting stumps of errant granjeno (*Celtis pallida*) and honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) -- not to mention the 50 bags of pine bark mulch layered over the area to waylay any weeds that might think about coming up and causing us more work.

And then Frank began eyeing the jungle between Hachinal Corner and the new Citrus Garden where an adaptive species of a really cool tree (with ties to the Central American cigar industry - that story only told during native plant walks) had become slowly hidden as the scrub brush took over. And thus began another rescue project for the Thursday morning crew.

Once the overgrowth was removed, the Tamaulipas olive tree (*Cordia alba*) was greatly highlighted -- but as most Texas Master Naturalists know, bare earth is ripe for opportunistic Guinea grass (*Megathyrsus maximus*). To combat that, we planted 14 Rio Grande butterfly bush plants (Tepozán), giving that space between the two gardens a working name of Butterfly Way. The team will determine the formal name for the new space.

In Texas, according to Al Richardson and Ken King's "Plants of Deep South Texas," the *Buddleja* butterfly bush species only occurs in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, never far from the banks of the Rio Grande. The creamy-colored flowers bloom spring and summer along the leaf axils of the long branches. The shrubs can reach to six and a half feet in height with a wide spread. It is a good nectar source for butterflies and other nectar-attracted insects.

* * *

Our **Thursday Morning Ebony Loop Volunteer Team** is always welcoming new volunteers. Winter Texans and local residents often work alongside us on Thursday mornings. We send out a weekly e-mail of prospective tasks. To join our team, please contact one of the co-chairs: Frank Wiseman at frankw.wiseman@gmail.com or Anita Westervelt at jjvanm@gmail.com

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Texas Master Naturalist Guided Native Plant Walks of the Ebony Loop Specialty Gardens

First Friday and Third Saturday through May 2020.

9 to 11 a.m.

Meet in the parking lot

- Level, quarter mile caliche trail
- Bring water and bug spray for yourself, if desired
- Restrooms at park entrance

Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park, 1000 South 499, two miles south of Harlingen's International Airport or just past the Arroyo-Colorado River Bridge on North Ed Carey Drive.

This two-hour walk earns two hours AT for members of either Valley chapter of Texas Master Naturalists.



*Chet Mink, Volker Imschweller, Chuck Cornell
Vivian Acott*



Chet, Anita Westervelt, Vivian



Janis Silveri, Frank Wiseman



Vivian



Volker, Chet, Anita



Vivian and Anita

MEDITATIONS ON FELLOW CREATURES

M. Kathy Raines

We humans are not alone. Fellow creatures abound, whether we encounter them at Sabal Palms Wildlife Refuge, walking the jetties, staring out back windows or enjoying our pet cats, dogs, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians or various invertebrates. Every morning I awake, excited about what wildlife I will observe and what I will learn.

Out my window in Brownsville, I see occasional bursts of green jays, a curved-billed thrasher rooting through debris around a stand of bamboo, and in summer and fall, so many brown anoles my dog is in ecstasy chasing them through the Turk's cap, as well as a disconcerting dearth of the once prevalent green ones. Redwing blackbirds appear at the feeder *en masse* come springtime, overpowering the usual sparrows, doves and black-crested titmice. On rare occasion, a small hawk appears on a low branch of our olive tree. Caramel-colored June bugs pop up in late spring. A sunny day—glistening leaves, setting a distant spider web aglow— heighten the effect.

Since I've been writing nature articles accompanied by photographs, I've become quasi-competent with a camera and find that my striving to get a decent photograph results in my watching an animal quite closely. Near the Sabal Palms boardwalk recently, a gray hawk—I'd thought it an osprey, the number of hawks I can accurately ID being slim—sat upon the highest limb, singing a periodic, "WheEEEEOOO!" then flying off for a cruise, screaming along its way. Assuring that I captured its image, I observed it for half an hour.



Gray Hawk (*Asturina nitida*)

We all enjoy nature in different ways. I neither fish nor hunt, but I certainly do not begrudge those who secure the meat of overabundant nilgai rather than, as I do, shop for meat, wrapped in plastic, nestled in Styrofoam.

Many birders derive pleasure from searching for, then crossing species off their lists. Try as I might, I do not find this satisfying, but I understand the urge compelling people to do so. And in the meantime, most birders I know experience great delight in taking photographs—which requires close observation—often posting those pictures on social media, along with astute observations. Though information abounds on the Internet with fine, reliable sources from eBird, Audubon and Texas Parks and Wildlife, it is most enlightening to read fresh observations of wildlife in our own vicinity.

And many express their love of fellow creatures through kind, altruistic acts: nurturing wildlife habitat, assisting pelicans on the roadway, rescuing sea turtles and nurturing their eggs, engaging in bird counts and banding, leading nature walks and activities for children and adults. Some become politically involved, to assure the presence of relatively unfragmented habitat

Watching documentaries and YouTube videos and reading articles and books on wildlife enhances my knowledge and humbles me considerably; I am continually amazed by the skills and mental acuity of other creatures. Some of my favorite books are *Zoobiquity*, by cardiologist Barbara Natterson-Herowitz, with Katherine Bowers, which highlights the behavioral commonalities between us and other creatures, and *Alex and Me*, by Irene M. Pebberberg, whose training and observations of the famous gray parrot Alex astounded us, leading to breakthroughs in our appreciation of parrot intelligence.

I feel honored to share the world with these creatures and, especially here in the Rio Grande Delta, to be able to observe so many of them on a daily basis. I often marvel that anyone speculates about the existence of intelligent life in the universe, when we have so much intelligent, non-human life in our backyards. Happy observations to all!



Watersking is fun

CONGRATULATIONS
MILESTONES: 4TH QUARTER 2019

Certification

	Month	Class
Ormar Cortez	Oct	2019
Judy Blades	Oct	2019
Janis Silveri	Oct	2019
Margie Cornwell	Dec	2019
Rosalinda Vargas	Dec	2019
Cecilia Sierra	Dec	2019
Kelly Crandell	Dec	2019

100 Hours

Chet Mink	Nov	2018
Emma Gonzales	Nov	2019
Jan Hartzog	Dec	2019

500 Hours

Adrian Ramos	Nov	2012
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